Beyond export education aspiring to put students at the heart of a university's internationalisation strategy

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Beyond “export education”: aspiring to put students at the heart of a university’s internationalisation strategy

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Abstract

For many universities around the world, internationalisation means the recruitment of fee-paying international students (so-called “export education”) for primarily commercial reasons. For UK universities, international (non-European Union) students account for approximately 13% of their annual revenues, making them highly dependent on international student recruitment. This paper discusses the attempt by one UK university to change direction and develop a new approach to internationalisation which puts an international learning experience for all students at the heart of its new strategic plan. It discusses the obstacles to changing direction in this way and shares some of the lessons learned about how to roll out an alternative university-wide internationalisation strategy.

Introduction

For many UK universities, internationalisation has been synonymous with the recruitment of fee-paying international students (so-called “export education”). For the UK’s higher education sector, tuition income from international (non-European Union) students amounted to £4.2bn or 12.7% of total revenue in 2014/15 (source: HESA). To put this figure in context, it exceeded the combined sectoral income from HEFCE research grants (£2.0bn) and UK Research Councils (1.8bn) in the same year. The UK universities’ dependence on international student recruitment has been at the forefront of debate in recent years, as the growth in export education has stalled in the face of the UK government’s efforts to control ‘net migration’. Recruitment at postgraduate level and from South Asia has been particularly adversely affected by the current student visa regime.
Table 1 shows the largest UK recruiters of international students in 2014/15 (excluding small, specialist institutions like London Business School and the Royal College of Art). International students accounted for 13.8% of total enrolments for the UK sector overall. For institutions like the London School of Economics and Political Science, however, the figure is 48.6%. Interestingly, the list of institutional market leaders includes both leading research-intensive institutions like Imperial College and University College London, as well as more teaching-intensive universities like Cardiff Metropolitan and Coventry.

Table 1: The largest UK recruiters of international (non-European Union) students (by percentage of enrolments) in 2014/15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>International Students</th>
<th>% International Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London School of Economics and Political Science</td>
<td>5,150</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Arts, London</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of St Andrews</td>
<td>3,510</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine</td>
<td>5,365</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiff Metropolitan University</td>
<td>4,340</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cranfield University</td>
<td>1,270</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School of Oriental and African Studies</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Leicester</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City University</td>
<td>5,070</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Liverpool</td>
<td>6,230</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College London</td>
<td>9,575</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry University</td>
<td>7,345</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HESA

The preoccupation with the number of international students and the monetary value to universities and the UK economy detracts attention from the educational benefits – for both home and international students – of internationalisation in the broader sense. While international student recruitment may increase the diversity and vibrancy of life on UK campuses (and even this is not a given), creating a meaningful international learning environment is about much more than maximising the number of international enrolments.

This paper discusses the attempt by one UK university to change direction and develop a new approach to internationalisation which puts an international learning experience for all students at the heart of its strategic plan. It discusses the obstacles to changing direction in this way and
shares some of the lessons learned about how to roll out an alternative university-wide internationalisation strategy.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins by defining the meaning of export education and reviews the size of the global market for internationally-mobile students, as well as the market leaders. It then considers the motivations of universities and their governments for engaging in export education. At this point, it poses the question: ‘What is the core mission of a university and how is this mission served – or not – by export education?’ It goes on to argue that internationalisation, not international student recruitment, should be at the centre of a university’s strategy. While export education plays a role, internationalisation is a much broader concept and challenges many assumptions about the way that universities are organised. The paper concludes with some of the obstacles to broadening internationalisation beyond export education and offers some ways in which these might be overcome.

What is export education?

Exports are simply goods and services sold by one country to another. In the case of goods, exports must be physically shipped from the producing to the consuming country. For services, however, they can be delivered to consumers virtually, for example, by allowing purchasers to download movies or music online from a provider in the exporting country. Alternatively, the exporting company may set up a subsidiary in the consumer’s country to offer the service; for example, banks and hotel chains have branches in multiple countries. Thirdly, the consumer may travel to the exporting country to consume the service, with tourism being the best-known example – when Chinese tourists travel to the UK, they are buying the exported services of their host country’s hotel and hospitality industries.

Education is a service industry and exporting education can also take three main forms (Healey 2008). Distance and online education provide a means of virtually supplying the services to students who remain in their own country. Like multinationals, some universities have set up subsidiaries offshore, to provide education directly to students in-country. The University of Nottingham is perhaps the best-known, with its ‘international branch campuses’ in Ningbo, China and Seminyeh, Malaysia. However, it is students travelling to foreign universities to
study which is the predominant form of educational service export. Like distance learning and branch campuses, it is only one of the ways that foreign students can consume an educational service, but the term ‘export education’ is normally reserved for students who travel abroad for their education. As Figure 1 shows, export education has grown significantly over the last 40 years, from 0.8m students in 1975 to 4.5m by 2012.

**Figure 1: Export education – how many students? (millions)**

![Graph showing the growth of export education from 0.8m students in 1975 to 4.5m by 2012.](source)


Figure 2 shows where internationally-mobile students go to study. It reveals that 80% of such students are enrolled in universities in the OECD, with the United States (19%), the UK (10%) and Australia (6%) being the most important destination countries. These host countries have the advantage of teaching in English, although the Bologna process is gradually eroding this edge as many continental European countries are increasingly offering their postgraduate degrees in English (Coleman 2006). The so-called ‘Main English-Speaking Destination Countries’ (MESDCs) also have either a large private university sector (United States) or a deregulated and marketised public higher education system (UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand), where universities are incentivised to recruit international students because they can charge full-cost tuition fees.
In many countries, university education is heavily publicly subsidised and there are limits on the number of international students that public universities want to, or are allowed to, enrol (De Wit 2002). For example, the Russian government operates a quota on the number of foreign students who are eligible for free tuition and scholarships on the same terms as Russian citizens (in 2015, the quota was 15,000). German universities may set international quotas where there is a ‘Numerus Clausus’ (closed numbers) limit on total enrolments to a programme. Similarly, Swiss universities can legally impose quotas on foreign students to control demand.

**Figure 2: Export education – where do they study (2012)?**

![Pie chart showing the market leaders in higher education]


Table 2 shows the market leaders in higher education. Although the United States is the largest destination market for international students, when the data is normalised to take account of the relative size of national university systems, a different pattern emerges. New Zealand,
Australia and the UK\(^1\) are the main English-speaking countries in terms of the percentage of total enrolments from abroad. The other big three, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Austria, have heavily subsidised higher education systems and attract students from their surrounding neighbours, who qualify for tuition subsidies because the European Economic Area (EEA) – which includes Switzerland – grants students from other EEA members the same rights as domestic students. Unlike universities in the English-speaking countries, there is no commercial advantage from international students to Luxemburgish, Swiss and Austrian universities and they generally do not actively promote recruitment abroad.

Table 2: Top ten host countries by percentage of international students, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>International students as a percentage of:</th>
<th>Bachelor’s enrolments</th>
<th>Master’s enrolments</th>
<th>Doctoral enrolments</th>
<th>Total enrolments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>85.0%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td></td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Why do universities engage in export education?**

Over time, universities and governments have had different motives for promoting export education (Altbach and Knight 2007, Altbach et al 2009, Gürüz 2010). One of the earliest was to support the economic growth of low income, developing countries. The best-known example of this was the ‘Colombo Plan’, as part of which the Australian and New Zealand governments provided scholarships for top students from developing economies in the Commonwealth (Blackton 1951). There was both an altruistic and a strategic dimension to

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\(^1\) Note: the OECD defines international students as students who normally reside in another country, while in the UK, only non-European Union students are classified as international students.
this form of development aid. On the one hand, the Colombo Plan trained future business people, politicians and civil servants who could return to their countries and put their studies to good use; on the other, it created an elite group in the Commonwealth Asia-Pacific that had strong professional and emotional ties to Australia and New Zealand, facilitating the promotion of commercial and political cooperation (Oakman 2010).

Using export education to build strategic relationships with third countries is often now termed ‘projecting soft power’ (Amirbek and Ydyrys 2014). Currently the Chinese government is the main exponent of this approach, using government scholarships to attract young people from the West to study Chinese language and culture in its universities, in the belief that they will return home as ‘boosters’ for the country of the alma maters (Nye 2015).

Some highly prestigious universities use export education as a means of talent acquisition. Universities like Harvard, Cambridge and Imperial College London recruit students globally, particularly at postgraduate level, to attract the brightest minds and keep them ahead of their rivals in terms of their institutional research productivity and quality. The motivation is not directly commercial, in the sense that they often pay scholarships to the top students, but the universities clearly expect a long-term financial return in the shape of better global rankings and higher research income.

Russia is presently using export education to improve its universities’ performance, but it is part of a wider strategy to reposition its higher education system which has lagged the West in world university rankings (Pugach 2012). A number of the main indicators which drive university rankings are linked to a university’s international profile. For example, both the QS and THE rankings use an academic and employer reputational survey to determine league table position. A university which teaches in Russian and recruits students from the Russian-speaking world is likely to be unknown outside Russia, especially if it has an obscure Soviet-era name written in Cyrillic. Both rankings also use the percentage of foreign students and faculty as a proxy for quality. Increasing the recruitment of international students (export education), ceteris paribus, boosts league table ranking directly, as well as indirectly by raising awareness of the brand name (many Russian universities are rebranding with English language names to support this strategy).
Revenue generation is, however, arguably the dominant motive for export education (eg, Cai and Kivistö 2013, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013, Tham 2013, Cantwell 2015). Higher education is an expensive business and governments which publicly subsidise universities to keep down tuition costs typically cap the number of university places available to control the overall cost to taxpayers. As tertiary participation rates have grown and governments have come under fiscal pressure from an ageing population, universities have seen their support from the taxpayer come under downward pressure.

In countries which have deregulated the recruitment of international students (ie, removed both tuition and enrolment caps), universities have been incentivised to recruit large numbers of full-cost international students which effectively cross-subsidise the teaching of domestic students in high-cost courses (eg, science and engineering) as well as research. Universities in Australia, UK and New Zealand are heavily dependent on international tuition revenue, but have flourished since deregulation (eg, Tarling 2012). Governments in continental Europe have noted the high global rankings of universities from the English-speaking world and some, notably Denmark, Finland and Sweden, have concluded that charging international students full-cost tuition fees is the only way of balancing the demands on the public purse with academic quality (West 2013).

**What is the core mission of a university?**

The core mission of a university is to create (through research) and disseminate (through teaching) knowledge. The perceived purpose of creating and disseminating knowledge has changed over the last 150 years, become gradually less noble as an ideal and steadily more instrumental. For example, the 1877 Oxford and Cambridge Act defines the mission of a university to be to ‘foster religion, education, learning and research’, implicitly assuming that these objectives are social goods that require no further explanation. Steven Schwartz, an Australian vice-chancellor, has argued that the mission of a university is ‘to help build a fairer, more just society’, on the grounds that higher education improves the life changes of graduates and reduces social inequality. Liam Burns, a former student politician in the UK, takes this further, claiming that ‘students are fairly clear about why they want to go to university…it is about getting a better job and having a better career’.
There is a clear thread running through these views of the role of a university, which is that higher education is a social good which makes graduates more productive and successful. This begs the important question: ‘Where does export education fit into this mission?’ At first sight, it is not at all clear that recruiting international students from around the world enhances the ability of a university to produce high-quality teaching and research. In the English-speaking world, faculty and domestic students often complain that large numbers of international students in the classroom adversely impact the learning experience, as the latter’s weaker English language ability and different learning styles make it difficult for them to engage in group discussions and problem-centred learning (Barron et al 2010). Taken to extremes, this is inevitably the case. An MSc in Management taught on an Australian campus where 80% of the students are native Chinese speakers is unlikely to be a satisfactory educational experience for the faculty, the domestic or the Chinese students. This percentage of international students is not uncommon at postgraduate level in some disciplines in Australia and the UK.

If the mission of a university is reframed for the contemporary world, export education slots more comfortably into place. Graduates today will join a globalised labour market. In a ‘flat world’, where everything is made everywhere and everyone and everything is digitally connected (the ‘internet of things’), to enjoy successful careers, graduates will need to work for foreign managers, cooperate with foreign co-workers, deal with foreign suppliers and buyers and, increasingly, move across borders to work and live. Negotiating the challenge of crossing cultural boundaries is not about taking a crash course in basic Chinese or Brazilian business culture and language. There are too many countries, ethnic groups, cultures and languages to ever make this feasible. Rather it is about enabling graduates to comprehend that there are multiple, equally legitimate ‘ontologies’ (social realities) which they need to respect and to which they need to adapt (Chen and Starosta 1997, Chiu 2013).

Young people grow up and are socialised into their parents’ world, in which there are socially constructed ways of understanding the world and interacting with others. When they first come into contact with a group that shares an alternative ontology, the immediate reaction is one of incomprehension: why do these people behave and organise themselves in such a strange way? Properly managed, this ‘ontological shock’ can be directed towards growing self-awareness, as they begin to realise that the other group has a world view which is different, but equally
valid. Once this bridge is crossed, the individual is more able to successfully transcend future cultural boundaries, as well as being more critical of the assumptions that underpin her own construction of reality.

To take a concrete example, imagine a young UK graduate from Mrs Thatcher’s UK, where the ‘user pays’, ‘there is no such thing as society’ and profit maximisation is the undisputed purpose of business. He goes to live in post-Soviet Russia in the early 1990s, in an apartment where the rent is nominal, heat and light are communally provided, telephone calls are free and shopping takes hours because stores are divided into small specialist units. From his perspective, the system is madness, with no prices to influence consumer behaviour or allocate resources and grotesque overstaffing in state enterprises. He does not yet understand this is still a collectivist society, where efficiency is less important that social housing and job security. To live in Russia in the early 1990s requires understanding the Russians’ world view, which in turn requires recognising the coexistence of multiple ontologies.

Seen in this light, the mission of a university becomes educating students to succeed in a globalised labour market (Taylor 2013). One of the most important ways that universities can do this is to organise their students’ learning experience to maximise the opportunities for ontological shock. Export education can clearly play an important role in this regard, but it is a fundamentally changed role in a student-centred internationalisation strategy. Being educated alongside large numbers of international students does not create ontological shock if the domestic and international students coexist independently (and ignorantly) of each other. Paradoxically, it is often the case that the larger the cohort of international students on a campus, the more likely they are to form self-sufficient cliques and not integrate with their domestic counterparts.

Creating opportunities for ontological shock means aiming for a diverse, rather than a large (and homogenous) international student body. It means finding ways to encourage domestic and international students to work together, through social activities to break down barriers and build mutual respect of each other’s cultures as well as through more formal group-based problem-solving in the classroom. It means getting domestic students to undertake outbound mobility, both to experience ontological shock during their time abroad and to better appreciate
the different world views of their fellow international students on their return (Universities UK 2015, 2016).

**Reflections on trying to put students at the heart of internationalisation**

This final section reviews the experience of one UK university in reimagining the role of export education within the wider context of an internationalisation strategy with student experience at its heart. For a number of years, internationalisation at the university had been synonymous with export education. The university had been successful at increasing both its overall international student enrolments as well as its share of the total UK market for inbound students through a focused, customer-centred sales and marketing campaign. But despite the growing numbers of international students on campus, there was little fundamental change in the culture of the university, which remained firmly positioned as an institution catering primarily for full-time, domestic school leavers. Campus life was built around academic study, sports and a vibrant social nightlife, which left many international students unintentionally marginalised.

Following the establishment of the new position of pro-vice-chancellor (international), the senior management began to consider broadening their approach to internationalisation beyond export education and, after a period of consultation, adopted a new strategic international plan in 2012 which aimed to ‘prepare students to become highly employable global citizens’ though five broad actions:

1. Internationalisation of the curriculum.
2. International student mobility.
3. International student recruitment (export education).
4. International student support and integration.
5. Internationalisation of the faculty.

Figure 3 summarises graphically the relationship between the five actions and the ultimate goal, which is to create an ‘international learning experience’ which fosters ontological shock, the appreciation of other cultures and ways of being – and so nurtures critical thinking. As argued earlier, the presence of international students on campus does not create an international learning experience *per se* and may be counterproductive, encouraging the ghettoization of
different national groups and fostering mutual suspicion and distrust. However, international recruitment which targets diversity rather than volume and is reinforced by strategies to integrate international and domestic students in both the classroom and extracurricular activities can fundamentally change the culture on campus.
Figure 3: Creating an international student experience

Reflections on the journey

This final section reviews some of the lessons learned over a four-year period of moving away from an export education orientation to a more holistic internationalisation strategy based on creating an international student experience.

**Lesson 1: Some “international” activities do not serve the goal of internationalisation (as redefined)**

Prior to the adoption of the new internationalisation strategy, the university had developed a number of transnational operations offshore. These had generally been established on an *ad hoc*, opportunistic and essentially reactive basis. They were typically ‘twinning’ operations in which a foreign private college delivered qualifications under the university’s ‘badge’ in return for a nominal license fee. There were two forms of twinning: franchises, in which the foreign partner delivered the university’s curriculum under license; and validations, in which the
partner developed its own curriculum and degree award title and the university’s quality assurance office ‘validated’ (ie, certified) it as equivalent to the university’s own qualification and licensed the partner to sell its degree as a degree of the university (Healey 2013).

These developments were generally ‘bottom-up’, in the sense that they were initiated and championed by individual faculty members, often based on family connections with the overseas market, and were sustained by the personal relationships which built up over time between faculty at the university and their counterparts in the private colleges. The bottom-up nature of the twinning arrangements mean that they enjoyed considerable support at the academic departmental level, which presumably accounted for the longevity of the relationships despite the very modest licensing revenue.

At a strategic level, however, they aggregated to approximately 7,000 offshore enrolments in 2012 (approximately 25% of the university’s total enrolments onshore), but lacked any compelling rationale. The twinning arrangements did not contribute in any meaningful way to the overall goal of creating an international student experience. Some supporters advanced the argument that they contributed to the international professional development of the faculty involved in them, but in reality, the pool of such colleagues was small and these faculty members often jealously guarded their relationship with the foreign colleges as they valued the opportunities to travel and spend time overseas.

Following the adoption of the new internationalisation plan, the university began the difficult process of evaluating each of its transnational operations against the new strategic goal and almost all arrangements were terminated, either as contracts came up for renewal or where there were break clauses. This process was very painful for those who had championed the twinning arrangements and who had close personal ties with the owners and managers of the foreign colleges that were being cast adrift. The teach-out periods were quite prolonged (up to five years), as the contracts required all registered students to be permitted to complete their qualifications before the twinning arrangements finally ended. The key lesson is that strategic planning is as much about determining the actions that will achieve the strategic goal as it is about identifying the current activities that are no longer aligned and need to be discontinued.
Lesson 2: Internationalisation means greater international student diversity, not (necessarily) increased international student recruitment

The current market for internationally mobile students is dominated by China. With a population of 1.3bn, a single child policy dating back to 1978 (now being phased out) and a growing middle class eager to give their single children an overseas education, outbound mobility has grown steadily and China now represents the largest source market for international students. Table 3 shows the relative importance of the main non-EU source countries for UK universities.

Table 3: Top 10 non-EU markets for international enrolments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011/12</th>
<th>2012/13</th>
<th>2013/14</th>
<th>2014/15</th>
<th>2015/16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>78,715</td>
<td>83,730</td>
<td>87,895</td>
<td>89,540</td>
<td>91,215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>14,545</td>
<td>15,100</td>
<td>16,635</td>
<td>17,060</td>
<td>17,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>16,335</td>
<td>16,225</td>
<td>16,485</td>
<td>16,865</td>
<td>17,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>29,900</td>
<td>22,375</td>
<td>19,750</td>
<td>18,325</td>
<td>16,745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong (SAR)</td>
<td>11,335</td>
<td>13,065</td>
<td>14,725</td>
<td>16,215</td>
<td>16,745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>17,620</td>
<td>17,390</td>
<td>18,020</td>
<td>17,920</td>
<td>16,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>9,860</td>
<td>9,435</td>
<td>9,060</td>
<td>8,595</td>
<td>8,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>5,290</td>
<td>6,015</td>
<td>6,790</td>
<td>7,295</td>
<td>7,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>6,235</td>
<td>6,170</td>
<td>6,340</td>
<td>6,240</td>
<td>6,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>6,115</td>
<td>6,185</td>
<td>6,350</td>
<td>6,075</td>
<td>5,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other</td>
<td>106,735</td>
<td>104,305</td>
<td>108,145</td>
<td>107,880</td>
<td>107,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>302,680</td>
<td>299,990</td>
<td>310,195</td>
<td>312,010</td>
<td>310,575</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HESA

The dilemma for a UK university is that the rate of return on investment in recruiting international students in China is much higher than in other markets. In India, notably, the market size has almost halved since 2011/12, as students have reacted adversely to the UK government’s introduction of a more stringent international student visa regime and the removal of post-study work rights. The costs of recruiting and converting India applicants have sharply risen over the five years to 2015/16. This means that if the international office is set an overall enrolment or tuition revenue target, it will naturally focus on the Chinese market.

The strategic goal of creating an international student experience is, however, best served by a diverse student population (Higher Education Policy Institute 2015). This implies drawing
students from a wide variety of national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, rather than focusing on a single national market. While export education and internationalisation are closely related, they can be mutually antagonistic. There is no easy solution to this dilemma. By setting targets for each national market, rather than a global recruitment target, the university raised the goal of internationalisation above the commercial objectives of maximising revenue from international student tuition income.

One way of reconciling the tension between international diversity and revenue maximisation is to return to the ultimate rationale for internationalisation. Students are best prepared to ‘become highly employable global citizens’ by studying as part of an ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse student body. This applies equally to UK, Chinese and Indian students. In the short term, revenue maximisation may be best served by recruiting a very high proportion of Chinese students, but if these students are such a dominant group that they do not integrate with other nationalities and have a poor educational experience, enrolments will subsequently slump as the message is spread to the next generation of students. In New Zealand, for example, a surge in Chinese enrolments in the period 2000-04 quickly reversed as stories of low completion rates and poor graduate employability circulated in Chinese social media (Smith and Rae 2006, Ministry of Education 2012).

**Lesson 3: Humans are naturally tribal: bringing tribes together to reap the benefits of internationalisation requires hard work (and food)**

Many universities’ internationalisation strategies stress the importance of integrating students in the classrooms, by creating multinational study groups or teams to undertake assignments and group work. While this is clearly desirable pedagogically, the fact that it needs to be explicitly part of a strategy highlights the innately tribal nature of human beings. People naturally gravitate to those with whom they share common ground. If the tribal groupings are being set by students in their social interactions, then it becomes very hard to break them down in the classroom (Brandenburg and De Wit 2011).

A series of focus groups with international students at the university revealed that the international students who integrated best with domestic students were those who had an interest or passion which transcended national or cultural boundaries (see also Glass et al
2014). For example, students who self-reported as being computer gaming ‘nerds’ were accustomed to interacting online globally in the gaming community and identified more closely with other ‘nerds’, regardless of their nationality, than they did with fellow nationals uninterested in gaming. Similarly, those with a passion for sports, either as followers of a particular team or as players, also found it easier to bond with students sharing the same passion from other countries. The more tribal the team (e.g., Manchester United) or the more niche (and the higher level) the sport they played (e.g., slalom canoeing, kickboxing), the greater the integration.

One finding from the focus group study was that the various student societies could do much more to reach out to potential members amongst the international student bodies, to mutual advantage – the society gained more active members and the international students integrated much more comprehensively. But the main conclusion was that it was very difficult to reach the mainstream students, who often reported feeling ‘shy’ and unwilling to engage with students from another nationality, particularly when both the domestic and the international students quickly developed friendship groups of fellow students of the same nationality.

After organising a series of social events which were often attended only by one nationality (e.g., a Chinese tea ceremony would attract mainly Chinese students), the university’s ‘Global Lounge’ discovered that food was the overwhelmingly dominant common interest of all students. By running regular free lunches for students, with a different cultural theme each week, the Global Lounge was able to draw in students of all nationalities and create a large multinational community, which allowed it to develop a range of other activities. The weekly ‘community lunches’, however, were at the heart of the success in integrating students and highlight the need to think laterally in finding ways to break down barriers between different student groups.

**Lesson 4: The students that will be most transformed by internationalisation are those most threatened by difference or least able to engage**

There is considerable evidence that internationalisation, most notably as a result of international student mobility, has very significant benefits in terms of improving graduate employability (Universities UK 2015, 2016). One of the challenges of managing
internationalisation in a university context, however, is that the opportunities are typically embraced most enthusiastically by those for whom the value-added is lowest. For example, a middle-class student whose parents have a holiday home in France and who has regularly taken foreign holidays to destinations in Africa and Asia, including a ‘gap year’ between high school and university spent backpacking around the globe, already has an international outlook. She will be attracted to the idea of a year’s study at an Erasmus partner university, but the transformative effect of this outbound mobility will be limited. In contrast, a working class male student who is the first in his family to study at university, and whose experience of the outside world is an occasional week at a ‘British’ resort in southern Spain, will find the idea of living abroad and speaking a foreign language daunting, but the experience is much more likely to prove life-changing.

The propensity to engage in international activities and the benefit that the student derives is, paradoxically, likely to be an inverse relationship. Those who flock eagerly to the international exchange fair on campus tend to be the middle-class students for whom an international exchange is well within their personal comfort zones, while those who stay in their dormitories believing that study abroad is not for them would gain the greatest benefit. Propensity to engage and ability to engage are closely related. The middle-class students often have parents who see the benefits of study abroad and are willing to pay for it from the ‘Bank of Mum and Dad’. The lower income students may be living at home to keep their costs down and need a part-time job to pay their way through university. Going abroad for a period may be financially infeasible for this group.

Recognising the risk that an emphasis on internationalisation may unintentionally deepen social inequalities between wealthier and poorer students, the university’s response was to focus on developing a wide range of ‘short cycle’ mobility opportunities (eg, international summer schools, field trips, study tours, internships) of two to three weeks, which were much more accessible to the lower income, more risk-averse students. This focus on short cycle mobility was coupled with the introduction of an income-contingent travel scholarship, which was restricted to low income students and designed to make short cycle opportunities affordable. There was very significant resistance to this scheme at the outset from the middle-class students who were first in the queue to sign up for the summer schools and field trips and pressure from some faculty members to make the scholarships academically merit-based.
However, by insisting on the need to make internationalisation accessible to all, gradually the numbers of low income students taking up the scholarships steadily rose.

Short cycle mobility is clearly a second-best to a semester or year-long exchange. The short cycle experiences invariably have English as the medium of instruction (although some included beginner’s courses in the national language), and are sometimes criticised for amounting to ‘academic tourism’. A year-long exchange studying in German in an Austrian university has a much more profound effect on the student and, regrettably, these longer-term motilities remain largely the preserve of the higher income students. Nonetheless, despite being a second best, short cycle mobility supported by appropriate financial aid provides an important way of ‘levelling the playing field’ and giving those who would benefit most from internationalisation a chance to engage.

Lesson 5: Universities are conservative - embracing internationalisation is uncomfortable

Universities are often likened to supertankers, slow to turn because they operate through a system of arcane decision-making committees organised within a set of impenetrable regulations and procedures. The world’s leading universities, with histories dating back centuries, set the cultural tone for the sector, which are characterised by deep conservatism and reluctance to change. Internationalisation is inherently threatening to many faculty members, as it highlights the changing world order and the need to prepare students who will join a globalised labour force.

The most striking manifestation of this fear of change is the way that many faculty members view international students in terms of a ‘deficit model’. They often say ‘International students can’t speak English properly’ and ‘Chinese students don’t know how to think critically’. What they mean, subconsciously, is that ‘International students can’t speak my language properly’ and ‘Chinese students don’t know how to think like I do’. It rarely occurs to them that they could not survive without a personal interpreter in an international student’s home country, or that in Chinese culture, the rote memorisation of huge tracts of text is a mark of great scholarship.
One strategy for changing campus culture is to make internationalisation very visible, in order to change faculty members’ perceptions of the identity of the university. By publicly and colourfully celebrating every major national and religious festival, the way that the university community thinks of itself can be gradually transformed from a national institution to a global meeting place. Mobility plays a role for both faculty and administrative staff. Sending staff abroad to teach and conduct research builds bonds with foreign colleagues and, more importantly, helps to create a growing cadre of staff on campus who are willing to embrace internationalisation at home.

The role of a pro vice-chancellor (international) is, for many universities, critical in sustaining change. Most universities are organised functionally. They have pro vice-chancellors (or deputy vice-chancellors) for research and teaching and learning. They have chief operating officers, chief finance officers and human resource directors. The academic units are led by deans. The senior management team is, accordingly, a group of senior staff who each have a specific portfolio. Internationalisation is cross-functional. It involves the way faculty are hired, inducted and rewarded (human resources), the way that resources are allocated (finance), the way that physical estate is planned (operations), the research that is supported and the courses that are developed and taught.

Unless there is a pro vice-chancellor (international) at the decision-making table, internationalisation is, at best, marginalised and at worst, completely ignored. There are endless examples of universities whose physical estate, catering and teaching and learning methodologies have been planned with no consideration for the changing composition and needs of its students. How many UK universities still do not have a dedicated Muslim prayer room with facilities for ablutions, fail to provide rice cookers in halls of residence or set examinations regardless of major religious events?

Internationalisation is a process and a change of mind-set, not a project to be managed to completion. At the same time, a pro vice-chancellor (international) is one of the few senior management jobs whose goal should be to make the role redundant. A university in which internationalisation is irreversibly embedded in the organisational culture does not need a senior champion for the cause, any more than today’s universities need a pro vice-chancellor
to represent the needs of women or Catholics (until the late 19th century Oxford and Cambridge only admitted male Protestants).
Conclusions

Although inspired by different motivations, the growth of export education has internationalised universities, particularly in the UK. This paper has argued that although export education plays a role, internationalisation is a much broader project, which is ultimately focused on providing an international learning experience for all students which creates global citizens. The experience of one UK university in implementing a broad-based internationalisation strategy suggests that there are a range of hurdles to be overcome, some of which are not obvious at the outset. These include disengaging from some international activities which do not serve the goal of internationalisation, focusing on the distribution by country rather than the volume of international students, using imaginative strategies to break down barriers between different nationalities outside the classroom, internationalising staff and keeping internationalisation high on the agenda in the face of a deeply conservative organisational culture. The road to an internalised university is bumpy, but the journey is hugely rewarding.

References


